

HEALTH-FITNESS

# What's been done to combat racism as a public health crisis in Columbus?

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Two years ago, the nation was rocked by hospitalizations and deaths brought on by COVID-19, and civil unrest following the deaths of George Floyd in May and others in the months that followed.

Those instances revealed racial disparities in Ohio, and Gov. Mike DeWine declared racism a public health crisis in August 2020.

Even before the pandemic, "we perceived racism as a known and an unaddressed epidemic," said Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO of the Columbus Urban League. "So, all COVID did for entities like ours is that it just revealed what we already knew."

**Racism and health:** Gov. Mike DeWine: 'Racism is a public health crisis'

Racism can affect all aspects of people's lives, including access to safe and affordable housing; employment and financial security; education; incarceration and health and mental health, Hightower said.

These racial disparities can contribute to barriers to accessing health care, including lack of transportation, insurance or finances, she said. It can also lead to a rise in illnesses or shorten the life expectancy of marginalized people due to chronic illnesses brought on by stress, diabetes, obesity and cardiac disease. Over the past decade, there's also has been a widening gap between white and Black infant mortality rates.

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During his August 2020 news briefing, DeWine also announced the formation of the Governor's Equity Advisory Board to help dismantle racism and health care inequities across the state. The governor also released the findings and recommendations of the Minority Health Strike Force, formed in April, to address racial disparities associated directly with the coronavirus pandemic.

About the same time, Columbus-based organizations and nonprofit groups were also working on efforts to tackle the problem.

## Columbus Public Health creates center to address racial health disparities

Four months before DeWine's declaration, Columbus Public Health created the Center for Public Health Innovation in April 2020.

"The mission ... is to increase life expectancy and improve quality of life by reducing health inequities in Columbus," Roberts said.

At the start of the pandemic, Columbus Public Health worked with communities of color and disenfranchised groups affected most by disparities in COVID-19 vaccination rates.

"When we started having vaccines available, we knew that some of the efforts we had to distribute the vaccines were not effective to reach our Black and brown communities, and our low-income communities," Roberts said.

Columbus Public Health started a weekly clinic that allowed residents to stop in or call to schedule a vaccination appointment instead of having to do so online, which Roberts said proved to be a barrier for these communities.

In July 2021, Columbus Public Health also started a Vax for Cash program, which was "very effective at reducing the disparity gap between Blacks and whites in terms of vaccine uptake," Roberts said.

The program offered \$100 Visa gift cards to Franklin County residents who got their first dose of the vaccine at Columbus Public Health or one of several neighborhood satellite clinics. The program ended in January.

"We found that more African Americans were vaccinated as a result of the Vax for Cash program than our Caucasian population," she said.

## **Columbus City Council tackles racism as a public health threat**

In June 2020, the city of Columbus also declared racism a public health crisis.

"That is right around the time that we saw what we now can officially call the murder of George Floyd and the deaths other unarmed black individuals across our country and even right here in the city of Columbus," Councilwoman Shayla Favor said.

Favor also serves as chair of the city's Housing, Health & Human Services and Criminal Justice and Judiciary Committees, where Favor said she is committed to addressing racial inequity and inequality.

"I have said since that day, that (the declaration) is an empty statement unless we can put legislation behind it to begin to affect change that starts to attack racism," she said.

In 2021, the council passed an ordinance to address housing income discrimination. The ordinance protects renters from discrimination based on income, including Social Security, child and/or spousal support, housing choice vouchers and other lawful means of payment.

"There's absolutely a connection there that needs to be made and I think that requires legislators to step in, see the problem and do something about it," she said.

The council also underwent a community engagement process to address the relationships residents have with public safety officials. Many community leaders have described a deeply fractured relationship between Columbus police and the residents they serve. And a report by Accountable Now, which collects data on police use-of-force cases from law enforcement agencies around the United States, found that more than half of the subjects of police use of

force in Columbus over a three-year period were Black residents, despite the fact that less than a third of the city's population is Black.

## Columbus Urban League wants to increase representation in health care, other industries

Similarly, the Columbus Urban League worked throughout the pandemic to provide educational material and vaccinations to marginalized communities throughout Franklin County.

And this year, the Urban League is beginning efforts to increase diversity and representation in industries where marginalized communities often feel excluded, such as health care.

The first step, Hightower said, is finding ways to recruit more doctors, nurses and medical professionals of color, so that people of color feel comfortable, safe and heard entering health care facilities.

## Health Policy Institute of Ohio provides guidance on combatting racism

Every two years, the Healthy Policy Institute of Ohio publishes its Health Value Dashboard, which collects more than 100 metrics of health and compares Ohio's data to other states. This allows state lawmakers and others to identify changes and room for improvement.

"We were hearing a lot from the stakeholders that we interact from all over the state that they were understanding more fully what the data was telling us," said Amy Rohling McGee, the group's president.

The institute publishes educational materials such as policy briefs and fact sheets that help display the connection between racism and health.

The February fact sheet found that policies, practices and beliefs rooted in racism can cause trauma and stress for people of color, which can lead to health issues such as high blood pressure, stroke, depression or early death.

The report shows that 27% of African Americans, 19% of Hispanic Ohioans and 21% of Asian Americans and indigenous Ohioans experience physical or emotional symptoms due to treatment based on their race compared to 4% of white Ohioans.

The institute also introduced two bills related to broadening access to doula services and reducing infant mortality rates. There's been a slight improvement in the infant mortality disparity over the last two years, but Rohling McGee said it's too early to know whether or not that trend will hold for the long-term.

"Something like structural racism, which has existed in our country for hundreds of years, will take time to unravel," she said. "But we need to be committing to making sure that our resources and the things that we're investing in are getting us to improvement."

## What are the next steps?

When addressing racism from a public health standpoint, the first step is to acknowledge the problem and seek educational resources on the topic, Rohling McGee said.

"It's a necessary, but insufficient step," she said. "The declaration of racism as a public health crisis is not enough. We have to commit to taking many, many, many more steps after that."

An important sentiment to remember, and one that is shared by several of the Columbus organization working to address the issue, is that dismantling racism is not a "quick fix," Roberts said.

"It takes effort, and it takes all of us," she said. "It's a comprehensive all hands-on deck approach that will take us some time before we really see and can reap all the benefits of that work."

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